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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EC](#)
SUBJECT: CORREA CLASHES WITH CHURCH ON CONSTITUTION

Classified By: Charge Doug Griffiths for reason 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Ecuador's conservative Catholic Church leadership has emerged as a key opponent of the draft constitution. The Church's Episcopal Conference was quick to voice its disapproval of the articles concerning the right to life, the definition of a family, and freedom of education. Its position is sure to influence some of its followers in this 90% Catholic country, but has irritated other, more liberal Catholics. President Correa lashed out fiercely in response, accusing the Church of distributing false information. End summary

CHURCH'S POSITION

¶2. (SBU) The Church's Episcopal Conference has expressed four concerns with Ecuador's draft constitution:

-- Perceived ambiguity of the article on whether the right to life begins at conception. The constitutional text reads: "The State will recognize and guarantee life, including care and protection from conception."

-- Definition of family called into question. The constitutional draft replaces the phrase "typical family" in the 1998 constitution with "types of families", which could be interpreted to include a homosexual union.

-- Contradictory articles on religious education. Although the constitution recognizes freedom of education, another article gives the State the right to determine what can and cannot be taught.

-- Lack of clarity on whether the State's role is to serve the people and society (as the Church believes) or vice versa.

¶3. (C) Constitutional provisions on abortion generated hot debate during the Constituent Assembly, and caused a fissure in the President's political movement. The President himself stepped in to broker the language that was eventually approved. However, the vagueness of the approved text, coupled with a subsequent article that gives women control over their fertility, has given the opposition a rare "hook" to generate opposition to the draft constitution.

¶4. (C) The Church leadership argues that it has a responsibility to educate its flock on important issues facing society. Indeed, the Church's catechism on the draft constitution comments favorably on a number of the constitutional provisions, particularly those concerning social justice questions, equality and access to health care. These positive observations have been overwhelmed by the media's attention to the critiques, attention that has been fanned by the president's sharp criticism of the Church's catechism and leadership.

¶5. (C) The Church hierarchy has stated that it will not campaign for or against the constitution. Episcopal Conference president Monsignor Arregui told Charge that he and other members of the Church hierarchy were merely focused on educating the faithful on Church doctrine. Many Catholic churches throughout Ecuador devoted attention to constitutional issues during their August 2-3 masses. For example, San Gabriel Church in Quito distributed flyers highlighting the Episcopal Conference's concerns. At the end of the mass, the priest devoted several minutes to discussing the issues. One third of the congregation left as they disagreed with the views presented. In Guayaquil, the faithful have been outraged by desecration of two churches.

CORREA'S COUNTERATTACK

¶6. (C) The notoriously thin-skinned President responded angrily to the Church's criticism of the draft Constitution. Himself a devout Catholic, he has accused the Catholic Church of being infiltrated with priests who are distributing false information. In his August 2 radio address, Correa read articles of the draft constitution to defend it against the arguments of the Church leadership. He pointed out that the constitution recognizes the family as the union between a man and a woman. Correa argued that on some issues, the Church is 300 years out of date, and highlighted the dissent of some priests, who have refused to preach against the draft constitution. The Episcopal Conference's interpretation, according to Correa, is the product of the corrupt elite exerting its influence over the Catholic Church. Other Cabinet members and the Constituent Assembly president have weighed in as well. Bishop Arregui told the Charge that he was outraged by the President's personal attack and would not be cowered. Indeed, he organized a meeting of bishops to enforce Church teaching on the constitution. Arregui also said that he would cooperate closely with evangelical churches in opposition to the draft constitution.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) President Correa is right to be concerned over the Catholic Church's criticism. Ecuador's highly conservative Church is a worthy foe in the battle over the draft constitution. Approximately 90% of Ecuadorians are at least nominally Catholic, and a recent poll found that 65% of the respondents have much or some confidence in the Catholic Church, the highest of any institution. Correa's sharp attacks on the Church and on individual prelates may only strengthen the opposition. However, we understand from sources in the Prosecutor General's office that the GOE has some information that the Church made windfall profits by buying property at a steep discount after the 1998 banking crash. Correa may intend to use this information to tarnish the Church hierarchy with accusations that they are in cahoots with the discredited former leaders in Ecuador. Given the respect of the Church in Ecuadorian society, this would be a high-risk strategy.

CDA Griffiths